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THE ORIGINS AND EMERGENCE OF THE CHURCH IN EDESSA DURING THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES A.D.

BY

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Recent discoveries have underlined the importance of Eastern Christianity in the early centuries of the Christian era. For too long Church historians tended to look at the early Church through Western, i.e. Graeco-Roman, eyes.[1] This was understandable inasmuch as the New Testament had been mainly concerned with the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem in a North West direction towards the capital of the Roman Empire, and most of the outstanding figures and literature of early Christian history appeared to be associated with the area around the Mediterranean seaboard. However early documents stemming from Syria, such as the *Odes of Solomon* and the *Acts of Thomas*, had long been known although it had proved difficult to fit these into a coherent history of Eastern Christianity. The discovery of the Gospel of *Thomas*, and the new light which it has thrown on Syriac Christianity, has re-opened this question. Our concern in this article is with early Christianity in Edessa, a city which became a major centre of the early Church deserving to rank with Rome, Ephesus, Alexandria and Antioch.

Edessa was the capital of the small principality of Osrhoene east of the Euphrates and it lay on the great trade route to the East which passed between the Syrian desert to the South and the mountains of Armenia to the North. The city's inhabitants spoke Syriac, an Aramaic dialect akin to, but not identical with, that spoken in Palestine; and this dialect was the medium of commerce in the Euphrates valley. The city was a centre of literary culture long before the coming of Christianity and its

[1] W. Bauer in his celebrated book, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (1934, 2nd ed. revised by G. Strecker 1964), held that the Church at Edessa was founded by followers of Marcion and that 'orthodox' Christianity did not arise in that city until the episcopate of Quna in the early fourth century. This theory must now be abandoned in the light of new evidence from Syriac sources. Bauer, with many other older Church historians, tended to regard Syriac Christianity as derivative and secondary to Greek Christianity.

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earliest surviving documents have about them an ease and fluidity, perhaps reflecting traces of Greek influence, which is not lost in modern translation.[2] The external history of Edessa was that of many another border state. When the Seleucid Empire was divided between Rome and Parthia Osrhoene lay on the frontier outside the confines of the Empire and within Parthian suzerainty. In Trajan's time c. 116 Edessa was stormed and sacked by the Roman General Lusius Quietus[3] and this was the beginning of the end of its independence. The superior power of Rome exacted a reluctant homage and, after the conclusion of the Parthian war under Marcus Aurelius, forts were constructed and a Roman garrison stationed in the town of Nisibis. The princes of Osrhoene attempted, without avail, to shake off the yoke and eventually in 216 Abgar IX, King of Edessa, was sent in chains to Rome and his dominions reduced to a Roman province. It was during the century between Trajan's war and the final Roman conquest that Christianity gained in strength in Edessa.

When and from whence was Christianity planted in this Syriac city? Eusebius *H. E.* 1.13 records the story of Addai, one of the seventy-two disciples, who had come to Edessa from Palestine in response to a letter from King Abgar to Jesus. This legend is recorded in Syriac in a book called the *Doctrine of Addai*[4] which was probably written c. 300 although it contains much older material. The details of the story need not detain us as they are obviously legendary. Thus Agbar IX (179–186) was the first *Christian* King of Edessa and in the *Doctrine* the background of his time is read back into the time of Jesus. However there is reason to think that Addai was a historical figure and that, as recorded in the *Doctrine*, he was a Jew from Palestine. When he came to Edessa we are told that he lodged at the house of Tobias, the son of one Tobias, a Palestinian Jew.[5] It is significant that although the Jews of Palestine

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[2] F. C. Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity* (1904) p. 7.

[3] Dio Cassius 68.30.

[4] Ed. G. Phillips (1876) p. 2ff. Eusebius *H.E.* 1.13 preserves the apocryphal correspondence between Jesus and Abgar which is also referred to in *Peregrinatio Aetheriae* 17.1 and which was known to be a forgery as early as *Decretum Gelasianum* 5.8 (T. & U. 38.4.57).

[5] *Doctrine* pp. 5–6. Addai is likely to be a historical figure as had the Church, c. 300, been looking for a historical founder 'Judas Thomas', whose tomb was claimed for Edessa in the mid-third century, would have been the most likely candidate. F. C. Burkitt, *J.T.S.* 25 (1924) p. 130, equated Tatian with Addai (abandoning his 1904 view) on the grounds that the *Doctrine of Addai* p. 36 states that Addai brought the *Diatessaron* to Edessa. This conjecture is unlikely as philologically there is no equivalence between the two names and, in any case, the *Doctrine* contains strata of different dates.

appear in an unfavourable light as the crucifiers of Jesus, the Edessan Jews are represented as being friendly to Christianity.[6] This appears to reflect a true historical reminiscence for Edessan Christianity, as it later developed, was strongly Jewish-Christian in outlook. Indeed Syrian Christianity came to reflect a particular facet of Judaism, viz. the asceticism of Jewish sectarianism. Thus in the writings of Aphraates (early fourth century), the first Syriac authority of any considerable weight, we find a view of the Church different from that prevailing in Greek-speaking Christendom.

For Aphraates baptism is not the means of Christian initiation for *every* Christian but a privilege reserved for celibates, i.e. the spiritual aristocracy. In the early baptismal liturgy known as the *Discourse on Penitents*[7] Aphraates states that marriage should be entered into *before* thinking of baptism, as baptism is only for virgins and celibates and is incompatible with the married state:

> "Anyone who has set his heart to the state of marriage let him marry before baptism, lest he will fall in the struggle and will be killed. And anyone who fears this part of the contest, let him retreat, lest he will break the heart of his brethren like his own heart. Anyone who loves possessions, let him retreat from the army, lest when the battle becomes hard for him, he will remember his possessions and retreat. And anyone who retreats from the struggle – shame belongs to him. Everyone who has not chosen himself and has not yet put on the armour, if he retreats he is not blamed. But everyone who chooses himself and puts on the armour, if he retreats from the struggle he will be laughed at. To him who empties himself the contest is suitable, because he does not remember something which is behind him and does not retreat to it."[8]

The Church, for Aphraates, consists of baptized celibates, who are the real spiritual athletes, together with a larger body of adherents who remain only on the fringe of the Christian community, much as the non-circumcized god-fearers only remained on the fringe of the synagogues in Judaism. This view is not special to Aphraates. Early Syriac Christianity is permeated with asceticism. Thus the terms *bar Q'yama* (son of the Covenant) and *bath Q'yama* (daughter of the Covenant) are found very frequently in Syriac literature, not simply in the sense 'monk' or

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At the time of its compilation c. 300 the *Diatessaron* was the *only* 'Gospel' used by the Syriac Church and it was natural to assume that it had originated with Addai.

[6] According to *Doctrine* p. 46f. Addai died in peace and was succeeded by his disciple Aggai who was apparently later martyred. It is interesting that the Jews are described as sorrowing at Addai's death. On the historicity of Addai see A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* I (Louvain, 1958) pp. 6–7.

[7] Wright p. 147f.

[8] Wright p. 345.

'nun' but referring to the baptized laity of the Church, i.e. the ascetics who have taken an oath or vow to be faithful to the Covenant with God and so have renounced the world. Subsequent to the time of Aphraates things changed and the *B'nai Q'yama* became a kind of monastic order within the Christian community, not the community itself. But this was not the earliest view. It is also significant that Aphraates, in *Discourse VI*, in his address to "those who have taken up the yoke of the Saints" states: "All the children of light are without fear of him, because the darkness flies from before the light. The children of the Good fear not the Evil One, for he hath given him to be trampled by their feet. When he makes himself like darkness unto them they become light; and when he creeps upon them like a serpent, they become salt, whereof he cannot eat ..." The children of the Light are the baptized ascetics who are constantly fighting a spiritual warfare against the prince of darkness, the devil. It is not without significance that the terms uniformly used in early Syriac literature of this conflict are 'struggle', 'fight', 'battle' and 'war'. *The Martyrdom of Shamona and Guria*, which dates from 297, repeatedly refers to the daughters of the Covenant (*b'nath Q'yama*) as ascetics and applies to Guria the term *m'qadd'sha*, 'hallowed' or 'holy'. The reason why Guria is holy is that she is celibate while Shamona, who has a daughter, is not.[9]

An affinity with the Jewish sectarianism of Qumran is immediately noticeable in the picture of the Syrian Church provided by Aphraates and other early Syriac documents. The Qumran community believed themselves to be the 'sons of the Covenant' and had separated themselves from ordinary Jewish life in order to seek a special holiness. It is interesting that the *Manual of Discipline* refers several times to God's Covenant which men enter into through embracing an ascetic form of life. So the neophytes entering the community "pass over into the Covenant of the presence of God". This Covenant was also, at Qumran, associated with a 'vow', i.e. it required a total commitment which had to be renewed each year. The community's deepest purpose was "to establish the Covenant according to the eternal ordinances".[10] The members also were known as the elect, the chosen of God, the Saints who had adopted the name "children of Light".[11] They were not concerned with social duties or with marriage as such, but had come apart to seek total purity of life.

[9] Burkitt *op. cit.* p. 132.
[10] I Qs 1.8, 16; 2.12; 5.10, 20–22.
[11] I Qs 8.6; I Qh 2.13.

They believed themselves to be engaged in a great spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness – a struggle which had cosmic repercussions.

It is likely, as we have seen, that Christianity had its origin in Edessa within a Jewish *milieu*, which had close associations with Palestinian sectarianism, and that the earliest converts were, in the main, Jews. It would appear not improbable that these early Jewish Christians stamped the Edessan Christian community with their own type of asceticism. An alternative to this view, not differing in essentials, is the theory of A. Vööbus[12] that an Aramaic-Christian movement, coming from Palestine, mediated this Jewish asceticism to the Syrian Church. Be that as it may it is certain that this primitive form of asceticism continued to be a feature of Syriac Christianity down to the time of Aphraates and later. So the *Doctrine of Addai* states that "all the society of men and women were modest and decorous, and they were holy and pure, and singly and modestly were they dwelling without spot, in the watchfulness of the ministry decorously, in their care for the poor, in their visitations of the sick".[13]

If then we place the origins of Christianity in Edessa within a Jewish-Christian *milieu* we can explain certain features in the Gospel of *Thomas* which is to be dated c. 140 and which probably emanated from Edessa. Dr. Frend, in a brilliant article,[14] has shown the Jewish-Christian character of many of the *logia* in *Thomas*. Thus the virtues stressed in that Gospel are childlikeness, singleness and simplicity, abstinence and world-renunciation.[15] Advance towards spiritual perfection is through the practice of ascetic virtues and repentance: "Blessed are the single (μοναχοί) and the elect, for you will find the Kingdom."[16] This Gospel, in common with other Jewish-Christian documents, exalts the position of James the Just.[17] And it stresses the attainment of perfection through complete sexual abnegation. Thus in *saying* 75, which appears to be related to the Parable of the Virgins in Mt. 25. 1–13, the 'many' who are left standing at

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[12] *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* I. pp. 1–10, 102. See also J.C.L. Gibson, From Qumran to Edessa or the Aramaic-speaking Church before and after 70 A.D. in: *The Annual of the Leeds University Oriental Society* V 1963–5 (Leiden, 1966) pp. 24–39.

[13] *Doctrine* pp. 47–48. Phillips translates the Syriac *Q'yama* as 'chiefs' but it seems more likely that with Burkitt (*op. cit.* p. 130) we should read 'society'.

[14] *J.T.S.* 18 N.S. (1967) pp. 13–26.

[15] *Sayings* 4, 6, 15, 23, 27, 37, 39, 46, 49, 79, 80, 81, 99, 101, 104, 105, 106, 110 and 114.

[16] *Saying* 49.

[17] *Saying* 12.

the bridegroom's door are not reproached for inattention to their duties but merely because they were not single. Only the celibates enter the bridal chamber. The 'elect' alone are complete beings and among them sexual differences have been transcended.[18] It will be noted how closely these sentiments in *Thomas* fit into the picture of Syrian Christianity drawn by Aphraates early in the fourth century. We can hardly doubt that from the outset the Church in Edessa was permeated by asceticism of a Jewish-Christian type. This ascetical tradition found literary expression as early as 140, in a slightly Gnosticized or dualistic form, in the Gospel of *Thomas*. An ascetic emphasis is found in all the various Syrian *Thomas* cycles, e.g. the *Acts of Thomas* c. 220 which prohibit baptized converts from marrying or living as man and wife. This was the earliest Christian practice in Edessa.[19]

We can then postulate the founding of the Church in Edessa among Syriac-speaking Jews who stamped an ascetic-encratite outlook on the nascent Church. How far are we justified in regarding ascetic Jewish-Christianity as the *only* facet of the Church in the earliest period? G. Quispel[20] holds that there were no Gnostics in Edessa in the second century and that Christianity there was wholly Jewish-Christian. If we are reserving the term 'Gnostic' for a developed Gnostic system then he may well be right. However it is worth remembering that Gnostic tendencies became allied to Judaism at an early date to judge from such documents as the *Gospel of Truth*. Both Basilides and Valentinus, the great Gnostic teachers, depend on earlier Jewish-Christian exegesis. There is thus no *a priori* improbability that ascetic Jewish-Christianity in Edessa may not have become permeated with incipient Gnostic or dualistic tendencies at an early period. A study of Tatian and Bardaisan would appear to confirm this.

Tatian, the brilliant Assyrian, provides our next reference to Christianity in Edessa. He was the son of Syriac-speaking parents (Clem.

[18] *Saying* 22.

[19] The *Psalms of Thomas*, adapted later by the Manichees, are also to be linked with Edessa in the second century. It is also possible, although not certain, that the *Odes of Solomon* emanated from Edessa in the second century. There is some connexion between these exuberant liturgical poems and the *Hodayoth* of Qumran. On the Edessan origin of the *Odes* see further J. de Zwaan in *Quantulacumque* (Studies presented to Kirsopp Lake) pp. 285–302 and J. A. Emerton, *J.T.S.* 18 N.S. (1967) pp. 372–406. A full discussion of the problems presented by the *Odes* is given by F. M. Braun in *Revue Thomiste* 65 (1957) pp. 597–625.

[20] In a paper read at the Fifth International Conference on Patristic Studies. Oxford 1967.

Alex. *Strom.* 3. 12. 81, Epiph. *Pan.* 46. 1. 11, Theodoret *Haer. Fab. Comp.* 1. 20.) and probably came from Hadiab. After leaving his Mesopotamian homeland Tatian had visited many lands and had been initiated into various Mysteries before becoming converted to Christianity and settling in Rome. He seems to have been a somewhat eclectic thinker from the beginning to whom an ascetic explanation of life appealed.[21] He was not however adverse from adopting a few semi-Gnostic ideas from Valentinus, something from the popular philosophy of the day, as well as drawing on earlier Jewish-Christian traditions. There has been much scholarly discussion as to the place to which Tatian returned after leaving Rome. A. Vööbus (*History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* pp. 38–39) holds that this was probably his own home town of Hadiab which was an important centre late in the second century. Older scholars, such as Zahn (*Tatian's Diatessaron* p. 282) and Harnack (*Chronologie* 1 p. 289) supported Edessa. This latter seems more probable in view of the close association of the *Diatessaron* with that city. If then, with Eusebius' *Chronicle*, we place Tatian's return to the East c. 172–173 and to Edessa we must envisage that there he carried his views to extreme lengths, if this process had not begun before. So, according to Jerome *Com. in Ep. ad Gal.* 6, he maintained that the flesh of Christ was imaginary, a view at variance with his earlier view in *Orat.* 21. He rejected marriage and meats (Jerome *Adv. Jovin.* 1. 3) and, like Marcion, rejected some of St. Paul's Epistles (Jerome *Praef. in Com. ad Tit.*). And, according to Irenaeus, he seceded from the Church, adopting certain invisible aeons, similar to those of Valentinus, denounced marriage as defilement and fornication, and denied the salvation of Adam (*Adv. Haer.* 1. 26). Clement of Alexandria and Origen state, in rather cryptic language, that Tatian not only inveighed against generation (*Strom.* 3. 12. 86) but that Tatian said that the words "Let there be Light" are to be taken as a prayer rather than a command, as if God was in darkness (Orig. *De Orat.*). This could be interpreted as marking a distinction between the Demiurge and the Good God or, at the least, as indicating a dualistic emphasis. It would seem that not only a radical asceticism, but also a tendency towards dualism, were part and parcel of Tatian's extreme views.

While these extreme views, if propagated during the latter part of Tatian's time in Rome, would no doubt have caused raised eyebrows it is

[21] See my forthcoming article "The Heresy of Tatian – Once Again", to be published in the *J.E.H.* (April 1968).

unlikely that this was the case in Edessa. The Gospel of *Thomas* itself is best explained as embodying an ascetic Jewish-Christian tradition which had been modified, although not fundamentally, in a dualistic direction. Tatian, eclectic thinker as he was, was primarily indebted to Jewish-Christian radical traditions and also, to a lesser extent, to dualistic ideas. His composition of the Syriac *Diatessaron*, or Harmony of the Gospels, which he may have carried out soon after his return to Edessa c. 172-173, is proof of this eclecticism. He used not only the four Canonical Gospels, which he had known in Greek in Rome, but also a tradition which had found literary expression in Edessa some thirty or so years before his time in the Gospel of *Thomas*. Indeed it is likely that he already knew certain of the *logia*, which appear in *Thomas*, from his Roman days earlier in his career;[22] undoubtedly many of these *logia* circulated independently in the Church and were known in widely different centres. The brilliant researches of G. Quispel have demonstrated that the semitic tradition embodied in *Thomas* was Tatian's 'fifth' source which he drew on when compiling his Harmony.[23]

There is also evidence that Tatian modified the tradition in the Canonical Gospels in an ascetic and encratite direction. Thus in Lk. 2. 36 the ordinary text speaks of the normal married life which Anna the prophetess lived with her husband seven years from her virginity. Tatian however corrected the text in the opposite direction so that it stated that Anna remained a virgin in her marriage (*Diatess. persiano* p. 22; Dutch harmony in the Stuttgart MS). There are other examples of changes, some of them very subtle, which have the effect of degrading the value of the married state (e.g. Mt. 19. 4–9 in the Dutch *Diatess.*). Several corrections illustrate Tatian's strict condemnatory attitude towards the use of wine. Even the word 'wine' in Jn. 15. 1 ("I am the true vine") he modified to read "I am the tree of the fruit of the truth" (*Diatess. persiano* p. 322). This same ascetic strain appears in his handling of the narrative of the Last Supper in Mk. 14. 25, Mt. 26. 29 where Jesus states he will not drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when he drinks it anew in his Father's Kingdom. Tatian cleverly omitted this idea of a renewed drinking from his harmony. In the Armenian translation of Ephraem's Commentary the text of the

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[22] *J.E.H.* forthcoming.

[23] L'Évangile selon Thomas et le Diatessaron, *V.C.* 13 (1959) pp. 87–117. See also his, *Makarius, das Thomasevangelium und das Lied von der Perle* (Suppl. to *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. 15; Leiden, 1967), and further Dom Aelred Baker, *J.T.S.* 16 N.S. (1965) pp. 449–454.

Diatessaron ran: "from now on I shall not drink from this generation of vine until the Kingdom of my father" (*Srboyn* 2 p. 152) which is a subtle change in an encratite direction. A slight change of word order or a gloss enabled Tatian to give a radical, ascetic turn to the Gospel teaching about possessions, family life, marriage and wine. And he also enhanced Jesus' teaching about carrying one's cross in Mk. 8. 34, Mt. 10. 38 by adding "on his shoulder" (Liège *Diatess.* p. 97; *Persiano* p. 134).

The *Diatessaron* became the Gospel *par-excellence* of Syriac-speaking Christianity and so it remained until early in the fifth century when Rabbula (bishop of Edessa 411–435) suppressed it and substituted a revision of the Old Syriac Canonical Gospels. Theodoret, the partisan of Nestorius, tells how he himself withdrew over two hundred copies of the *Diatessaron* from circulation in his diocese and replaced them by the Gospels of the four evangelists.[24] Tatian's *Diatessaron* for nearly two and a half centuries was the *only* version of the Gospels which was used in Syriac-speaking Christianity. The reason for this is not far to seek. The *Diatessaron* appealed to the Edessan Church because its outlook was congruous with an ascetic-encratite tradition which was strong in that Church from the outset. So, in the *Diatessaron*, Tatian cut out the genealogies Mt. 1. 1–17 and Lk. 3. 23–28 and, according to Theodoret, "such other passages as shewed the Lord to have been born of the seed of David after the flesh".[25] This dilution of the historical basis of the Gospel is undoubtedly present in the *Diatessaron*, as far as it can be reconstructed,[26] and is similar to that found in the Gospel of *Thomas*.

Tatian, then, is best interpreted as a witness to the ascetic and eclectic character of Edessan Christianity in the latter part of the second century. This eclecticism reached its climax in the advent of Bardaisan (Greek, *Bardesanes*).[27] He was one of the most remarkable figures in the early

[24] *Haer. Fab. Comp.* 1.20.

[25] *Haer. Fab. Comp. op. cit.*

[26] Latin, Arabic, Old Dutch and Persian versions of the *Diatessaron* are known together with the Armenian version of Ephraem's commentary upon it. The problem of the original language of the Harmony has not been solved by the discovery at Dura of a Greek fragment (ed. C. H. Kraeling, *Studies and Documents* 3. Harvard and London, 1935). I incline to favour a Syriac original composed by Tatian soon after leaving Rome, although the possibility of an original dual edition in Syriac and Greek should not be excluded. The problem is very difficult and, unless further MS discoveries are made, is likely to remain insoluble.

[27] The best study of Bardaisan is that of H. H. Schaeder in *Z.K.G.* 51 (1932) pp. 21–73. The masterly article by F. J. A. Hort in *D.C.B.* 1 pp. 250–260 is however still of value. See also H. J. W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen, 1966).

period of the Church and the standard text books on early Church History rarely do him justice. He was born in Edessa in 155 of rich parents and received his name *son of Daisan* from his mother who had brought him forth on the bank of the river Daisan which flows by the capital. He was brought up at the court of King Abgar where he seems to have excelled in archery[28] as well as in learning. It was during the last quarter of the second century that Bardaisan became a Christian ("he embraced the faith, and received baptism; yea he taught the doctrine of the Church at Edessa" (*Barheb.*)) and he was active as a *savant* until the time of his death in 223 by which time he had separated himself from the Edessan Church. Later ages were to regard him as a heretic and monastic libraries did not even preserve confutations of his doctrines. His original teaching has therefore to be reconstructed from scattered notices and partisan accounts of later chroniclers. Eusebius, *H.E.* 4. 30, says that Bardaisan was exclusively a Syrian writer, attached at first to the school of Valentinus, but who later condemned and refuted the Valentinian mythology – supposing himself to have passed over to orthodoxy yet not altogether successful in washing away the stains of his old heresy. He wrote controversial dialogues against Marcion (the Marcionite movement was apparently strong in his region) and other heretics some of which had been translated into Greek. Among these was a *Dialogue on Fate* addressed to Antoninus, by whom Eusebius or his source may possibly have meant Caracalla. Eusebius gives no exact date for Bardaisan's activity apart from placing him under Soter c. 179 which may not be far removed from the actual date of his conversion to Christianity. Ephraem states that he wrote a book of 150 hymns and it seems probable that Bardaisan's son, Harmonius, adapted these to metrical forms and musical accompaniment; we know that these hymns and tunes continued to be used in Edessa until Ephraem's time.[29]

Bardaisan's theology is difficult to evaluate. According to Eusebius he fought against Valentinian heresy even after his conversion to Christianity while Epiphanius states that he was a distinguished Church

[28] Julius Africanus *Cest.* 29.

[29] Sozomen *H.E.* 3.16; Theodoret *H.E.* 4.26. These writers however do not state that Harmonius adapted *Bardaisan's* hymns, but this is a reasonable inference. On Bardaisan's important place in the history of liturgical music see the thesis of J. Gélineau, *Antiphona. Recherches sur les formes liturgiques de la psalmodie dans les églises syriaques aux IV^e et V^e siècles* (Paris, 1960) quoted in Daniélou-Marrou, *The Christian Centuries* Vol. 1 p. 191.

teacher, accomplished in both Greek and Syriac, who became corrupted by the Valentinians and fell into heresy setting forth a doctrine of 'many' principles and emanations and denying the resurrection of the dead (*Haer.* 56). Hippolytus names him as a leader of the Oriental school of Valentinianism (*Ref.* 7. 31). Certainly later ages saw in Bardaisan the lineaments of a heretic *par excellence*. However the scattered fragments we possess of his writings, and the Greek *Dialogue on Fate* which, in Syriac, was known as the *Book of the Laws of the Land*,[30] do not really support the view that he was a Valentinian. There are traces (but no more) of Gnostic influence in some of his ideas although not in his main doctrines. So it is only by importing Tetrads and Ogdoads into his 'system' that Bardaisan's extant fragments can be fitted into a Valentinian scheme. Rather what we find is a Syrian Jewish-Christian Gnosis similar to that which appears in the Gospel of *Thomas*. Bardaisan refutes, in a scholarly manner, in the *Book of the Laws of the Land* the native astrologer Awida and shews him that there is room in the universe for free-will. One ruling principle is nature, the second is fate; yet although men cannot change either law (nature) or chance (fate) there is yet an area of existence between them in which men can exercise their free-will, which is his third ruling principle. Man can thus, to some extent, determine his own character and destiny.[31] Tatian also dealt with this in *Orat.* 11.

Bardaisan was much interested in the creation and the fall of the angels but his cosmology is quite different from that which appears in the developed Gnostic systems. He believed that God created first the different elements, separating one from another and assigning each a place; unfortunately the elements became mixed up and produced confusion. God then created the universe by mixing light and darkness but after six thousand years the elements will be restored to their pristine purity. Men's bodies belong to the second world, are ruled by the stars and so will not rise again. Bardaisan is clearly an eclectic thinker who drew on widespread astrological lore and semi-Gnostic ideas. However his dualism is no more developed than that of Tatian and may be due to the ascetic tradition which greatly influenced the Church at Edessa. There are also traces of Iranian influence similar to that found in the Qumran

[30] P. Syr. 1.2. 492–657. This was written by a disciple Philip but it seems to reflect Bardaisan's teaching. Most modern scholars believe that Syriac, rather than Greek, was its original language. H.E.W.Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (1954) p. 91.

[31] P.Carrington, *The Early Christian Church* (1957) Vol. 2 p. 402 for a good summary.

Manual of Discipline.[32] And there is much native Syrian theology in his writings. Thus the Holy Spirit is depicted under the image of the Mother and is identified with 'Wisdom'. The Holy Spirit as 'Mother' addresses the elder of two daughters and to them are assigned cosmogonic functions.[33] Bardaisan is best interpreted as an eclectic thinker who was interested in astrology and cosmogony. There is nothing really to connect him with Valentinus. His origin is within the native Syrian tradition of Edessa which had its roots in a radical Jewish-Christian asceticism, although his vision took him somewhat beyond this. As H. E. W. Turner acutely points out he is half way to Mani, rather than to Valentinus.[34]

Bardaisan gives some interesting information about the Church in his day:

> "What then shall we say of the new race of us Christians, whom in every country and in every region the Messiah established at his coming? For lo, all of us wherever we be are called Christians by the one Name of the Messiah; and on one day, the first day of the week, we assemble together, and on specified days we abstain from food. And of these national customs, our brethren abstain from all that is contrary to their profession. Parthian Christians do not take two wives, Jewish Christians are not circumcised. Our sisters among the Bactrians do not practise promiscuity with strangers. Our Persian brethren do not take their daughters to wife; our Median brethren do not desert their dying relatives or bury them alive or throw them to the dogs. Nor do Christians in Edessa kill their wives or sisters that commit fornication, as the heathen Edessenes do, but they keep them apart and commit them to the judgement of God."[35]

Bardaisan is conscious that Christians are a new race separate from the surrounding heathen population and that they worship together corporately on Sundays. He also bears witness to the astounding moral change wrought by the coming of Christianity which is also referred to by the second century Greek apologists (e.g. Justin 1 *Apol.* 14). This was, in fact, part of its attraction not only in the Greek but also in the Syriac-speaking world. Christians, even the non-baptized non-ascetics, were *seen* to be endowed with a superior moral power which was slowly pervading society.

Bardaisan was an original, independent eclectic thinker – and Syrian Christianity throughout its history had no surfeit of such. He operated at first from within the Christian community at Edessa but his field of vision went beyond the Old Testament and the origins of Christianity to embrace many 'borderland' ideas. Yet on the whole his extant fragments and the

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[32] Daniélou-Marrou *op. cit.* p. 190.
[33] *Laws* 557–558.
[34] *Op. cit.* p. 94.
[35] Quoted in Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity* p. 184.

Book of the Laws of the Land reveal a reverence towards God the Lord of all things, gratitude for his benefits, a desire to obey the discipline of the Church, a courteous spirit towards opponents, and a firm faith in the Judge of the earth.[36] Most probably his independence and speculative non-biblical approach led to his leaving the Church. His followers however lingered on until Rabbula, two centuries and a quarter later, induced them to submit to the Church. Bardaisan himself died in 223.

If then we look back to the origins of the Church in Edessa it would seem that we must envisage an evangelisation from Palestine which took root among the strong Jewish colony in the city. From this seed an indigenous Syriac Christianity developed along ascetic and encratite lines which early on became permeated with dualistic tendencies. Within this *milieu* can be placed the Gospel of *Thomas*, the Odes of *Solomon*, the Psalms of *Thomas* and the work of Tatian which culminated in the Syriac *Diatessaron*. It would seem that other writings from the Gnostic library of Chenoboskion originated or were known at an early date in Edessa such as the Gospel of *Philip* and the *Evangelium Veritatis* which, according to Nagel, reflects certain Syriacisms.[37] Moreover we also know that the eclectic sect known as the Quqites[38] arose in Edessa in the second century which had connections not only with ascetic Jewish-Christianity – particularly in its rules for purity – but also with ideas later found in Bardaisan. This sect gathered under its wing many Syrian-Mesopotamian cults, as well as a smattering of Christianity. Probably we must envisage a complex collection of loosely connected groups[39] in Edessa towards the end of the second century – a suitable *milieu* for Christian Gnostic and semi-Gnostic beliefs to develop.

Within this eclecticism we must place the outstanding original scientific intellect of Bardaisan. However wide-ranging, independent speculation was never a Syrian strong point and it appears that he fell into disfavour. By c. 200 A.D. the Church in Edessa must have been of some size to judge from the wide expansion of Christianity in the early third century in Osrhoene and Adiabene. According to the *Chronicle of Arbela* there were

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[36] Burkitt *op. cit.* p. 188.

[37] P. Nagel, Die Herkunft des Evangelium Veritatis in sprachlicher Sicht, *O.L.Z.* (1966) Col. 5–14.

[38] The best recent study of Quq and the Quqites is that of H.J.W. Drijvers in *Numen* Vol. 14 (1967) pp. 104–129.

[39] A.F.J. Klijn, *Edessa de stad van de apostel Thomas* (Baarn, 1962).

more than twenty bishoprics in the region bordering the Tigris in 224, when the Sassanid dynasty came to power in Persia. We have, in fact, a firm reference to the existence of Church buildings in Edessa in 201 in the *Edessene Chronicle* which speaks of damage by flood to the royal palace and to the "holiness of the Church of the Christians".[40] Walter Bauer thought this way of describing a church building highly suspicious. However there is no reason to doubt the historicity of the reference; P. Kahle considered it a certain fact in an obscure period.[41] Most probably it refers to the sanctuary of the Church building which would suggest that the Christian community was then of some size.

It would also seem that about this time there was a movement among a section of the Church in Edessa for a closer connexion with Greek-speaking Christianity. Thus the *Doctrine of Addai* (p. 50) and the *Martyrdom of Barsamya* state that Palut, bishop of Edessa, was not ordained by Aggai but by Serapion of Antioch (bishop 190–209). While there is some chronological confusion in the further statement that Serapion himself was ordained by Zephyrinus of Rome (bishop 202–218) there seems no good reason to doubt Palut's connexion with the Church in Antioch, although this is described as a 'free fabrication' by A. Vööbus.[42] It is however doubtful if he was a representative of more than a section of the Edessan Church at the turn of the third century to judge from later notices about him.[43] Syriac Christianity continued to be an independent branch of Christianity, ascetic in outlook and strongly influenced by Jewish ways of thought, down to the beginning of the fourth century.[44]

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[40] Items 1 + 9 (*Scriptores Syri* III. 4.3–4).

[41] *The Cairo Geniza* p. 197.

[42] *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* I. p. 3.

[43] Ephraem Syrus, *Mid.* 22.5–6 (J. B. Assemani 2, 486).

[44] As in the *Acts of Thomas*. The exegesis of both Aphraates and Ephraem reflects a strong rabbinic influence. See L. Leloir, *Éphrem de Nisibe: Commentaire de l'Évangile Concordant ou Diatessaron* (1966). A. Levine, in *Studia Patristica* I (1957) pp. 484–491, has demonstrated the indebtedness of a Syriac Commentary on the Pentateuch (written c. 900) to Rabbinical Haggadic exegesis. This commentary preserves the comments and views of renowned early Syrian scholars. The curious order of the baptismal – confirmation rites in Syria, in which chrism comes before baptism, may also owe something to Jewish usage. From the second century onwards Jewish practice was to circumcise first and then to give proselyte baptism. If there is a parallel between chrism and circumcision this may account for the Syrian order. Is it also significant that Ephraem compares Christian initiation to the Jewish treatment of a leper in which anointing with oil precedes the washing with water? See further J. H. Crehan, *J.T.S.* 18. N.S. (1967) pp. 489–490.

We should be unwise to exaggerate the importance of early Syriac Christianity because of the discovery of the Gospel of *Thomas*. The fact that we can now push back the history of the Church in Edessa into the first century and show that it was strongly influenced by an early Jewish-Christian Gospel tradition does not revolutionize the history of the early Church, as Quispel suggests. But it does demonstrate that an early Christian tradition existed in Edessa, having its roots in Palestinian sectarianism, which was non-Greek in outlook. This Syrian Christianity was permeated at its core by an ascetic outlook independent of, and prior to, the Christian monasticism which arose in the Roman Empire in Egypt in the fourth century. However this original branch of Christendom did not long succeed in retaining its independence. Rabbula, bishop of Edessa in the early fifth century, loved above all things order and, in any event, popular sentiment induced him to choose the anti-Nestorian side in the great controversy then raging. The result was that the Church in Edessa was largely assimilated on the practical, although not on the theological, level to Antioch and the other major centres of Greek-speaking Christianity. Edessa, and the rest of Syriac-speaking Christianity, was no longer cut off from other Churches by its indigenous Syriac Bible, liturgy and doctrine. However Greek theology did not fit easily into the exuberant, non-dogmatic Syriac outlook and the Syrian Church, being without first rate intellects, was the loser. From the fifth century onwards Syriac-speaking Christianity became, in the main, secondary to Greek Christendom. But that it had an original, independent existence with a theological approach of its own should not be forgotten in the study of the origins of the Church.

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